



City of Gaithersburg Press Release

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For Immediate Release

Día de los Muertos Altar Exhibit on Display Weekdays October 26 – November 4 at Activity Center

Gaithersburg, MD (October 9, 2020) The City of Gaithersburg's [Multicultural Affairs Committee](#) and De Colores Mexican Folk Dance Company present "Altar de Día de los Muertos" at the [Activity Center at Bohrer Park](#), 506 South Frederick Avenue. View the exhibit weekdays from October 26 through November 4, 2020 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. All visitors must wear masks and practice social distancing. For more information please call 240-805-1528. Note that early voting and Election Day voting for the general election will be taking place at the Activity Center October 26 through November 3. Please anticipate crowds.

The below information was provided by De Colores Mexican Folk Dance Company:

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is not a Mexican version of Halloween. Though related, the two annual events differ greatly in traditions and tone. Whereas Halloween is a dark night of terror and mischief, Day of the Dead festivities unfold over two days in an explosion of color and life-affirming joy. Sure, the theme is death, but the point is to demonstrate love and respect for deceased family members. In towns and cities throughout Mexico, revelers don funky makeup and costumes, hold parades and parties, sing and dance, and make offerings to lost loved ones.

The rituals are rife with symbolic meaning. The more you understand about this feast for the senses, the more you will appreciate it.

Recognition by UNESCO

Thanks to efforts by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, the term "cultural heritage" is not limited to monuments and collections of objects. It also includes living expressions of culture—traditions—passed down from generation to generation. In 2008, UNESCO recognized the importance of Día de los Muertos by adding the holiday to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Today Mexicans from all religious and ethnic backgrounds celebrate Día de los Muertos, but at its core, the holiday is a reaffirmation of indigenous life.

Day of the Dead originated several thousand years ago with the Aztec, Toltec, and other Nahua people, who considered mourning the dead disrespectful. For these pre-Hispanic cultures, death was a natural phase in life's long continuum. The dead were still members of the community, kept alive in memory and spirit—and during Día de los Muertos, they temporarily returned to Earth.

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2-2-2/ Día de los Muertos Altar Exhibit

Today's Día de los Muertos celebration is a mash-up of pre-Hispanic religious rites and Christian feasts. It takes place on November 1 and 2—All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on the Catholic calendar—around the time of the fall maize harvest.

Altars

The centerpiece of the celebration is an altar, or ofrenda, built in private homes and cemeteries. These aren't altars for worshipping; rather, they're meant to welcome spirits back to the realm of the living. As such, they're loaded with offerings—water to quench thirst after the long journey, food, family photos, and a candle for each dead relative. If one of the spirits is a child, you might find small toys on the altar. Marigolds are the main flowers used to decorate the altar. Scattered from altar to gravesite, marigold petals guide wandering souls back to their place of rest. The smoke from copal incense, made from tree resin, transmits praise and prayers and purifies the area around the altar.

Literary Calaveras

Calavera means "skull." But during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, calavera was used to describe short, humorous poems, which were often sarcastic tombstone epitaphs published in newspapers that poked fun at the living. These literary calaveras eventually became a popular part of Día de los Muertos celebrations. Today the practice is alive and well. You'll find these clever, biting poems in print, read aloud, and broadcast on television and radio programs.

The Calavera Catrina

In the early 20th century, Mexican political cartoonist and lithographer José Guadalupe Posada created an etching to accompany a literary calavera. Posada dressed his personification of death in fancy French garb and called it Calavera Garbancera, intending it as social commentary on Mexican society's emulation of European sophistication. "Todos somos calaveras," a quote commonly attributed to Posada, means "we are all skeletons." Underneath all our manmade trappings, we are all the same.

Costumes

Day of the Dead is an extremely social holiday that spills into streets and public squares at all hours of the day and night. Dressing up as skeletons is part of the fun. People of all ages have their faces artfully painted to resemble skulls, and, mimicking the calavera Catrina, they don suits and fancy dresses. Many revelers wear shells or other noisemakers to amp up the excitement—and also possibly to rouse the dead and keep them close during the fun.

Papel Picado

You've probably seen this beautiful Mexican paper craft plenty of times in stateside Mexican restaurants. The literal translation, pierced paper, perfectly describes how it's made. Artisans stack colored tissue paper in dozens of layers, then perforate the layers with hammer and chisel points. Papel picado isn't used exclusively during Day of the Dead, but it plays an important role in the holiday. Draped around altars and in the streets, the art represents the wind and the fragility of life.

For more information about the Multicultural Affairs Committee, visit www.gaithersburgmd.gov.

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